

Talking Points - Exposure to Raw Sewage

Failing septic systems are a public health issue.

Exposure to raw sewage is a human health hazard that should not be taken lightly. I am especially concerned for our citizens that are the most vulnerable – young children, pregnant women, the elderly, and those that have compromised immune systems, i.e. people with HIV, transplant recipients, cancer patients.

Raw sewage contains various pathogens, such as bacteria, especially E. coli; parasites and viruses. It may also contain chemical toxins, including heavy metals and pesticides, and pharmaceuticals.

Health hazards from exposure to raw sewage occurs through direct contact with contaminated water as well as food and drinking water contamination. Recreational exposure usually occurs through ingestion, but can also occur through the eyes, ears and nose.

Rotavirus, often associated with contaminated water, is the most common cause of severe diarrhea among children, leading to more than 50,000 hospitalizations annually in the United States.

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) estimates 7 million people get sick each year from sewage dumping or exposure to raw sewage. EPA ranks septic systems as one of the top five sources of groundwater contamination.

Individuals coming into contact with contaminated water can contract illnesses such as typhoid, tuberculosis, dysentery, cholera, tetanus, hepatitis, and several types of gastroenteritis. The problem is compounded by the use of antibiotic resistant "superbugs" that can cause infections such as SARS which can be transmitted through sewage.

The health of the fish we eat can be adversely impacted leaving them vulnerable to disease after coming in contact with raw sewage, as toxins bio-accumulate in fish. We're still learning about the health effects of industrial chemicals found in increasing quantities in blood, breast milk and other body fluids.

While there is disagreement over the number of people that become sick from being exposed to raw or improperly treated sewage each year, there is wide agreement that more information needs to be collected to protect the public health and environmental health.

74% of the soils in Marion County are rated "not suitable" for septic systems.

The Culex mosquito, often associated with the West Nile and St. Louis encephalitis viruses, prefers to breed in sewage contaminated water.

Marion County Health Department staff have sampled creeks and streams in neighborhoods served by septic systems and found that E. coli counts are higher than counts found in Combined Sewer Overflow impacted streams.

The health department supports efforts to extend public sewers into existing neighborhoods.

The health department will continue to educate septic system owners on how to properly use and maintain their systems.

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